

Colossians – September 14th, 2014 – Colossians 2:16-17

A Review of Gnosticism

The book of Colossians is packed from beginning to end with allusions to the false teaching which was threatening to wreck the Colossian church. The remainder of chapter 2 directly addresses some aspects of the new Gnostic teaching that we have not yet discussed. Therefore, in an effort to make better sense of Paul's warnings in these verses, let's review Gnosticism and add a couple of additional comments about its ethics.

Gnosticism – a religious movement of the first 3 centuries that combined Greek, Jewish, and Christian ideas into one philosophical religion. The name comes from the Greek word “gnosis” which means “knowledge.”

Gnostics beliefs:

1. Since there is enormous trouble, evil, and suffering in the world, everything that is part of this world must be bad. Hence, **spirit** alone is good and **all physical matter** is evil. This is the basic philosophical premise from which all other Gnostic beliefs spring.
2. God is spirit, thus good, therefore He can't be the Creator of this matter, which is evil, nor can He touch this evil matter to mold and shape the universe.
3. God issued forth a series of “emanations,” each one of which contained a little bit less of the total “divine fullness” (Greek word – pleroma) until a distant emanation could touch this evil matter and form the world.
4. Since Jesus was good, and matter is evil, Jesus' body was not really flesh and blood. It was merely a phantom.
5. Jesus, being good, could have no connection with this evil world. He was not its Creator or ruler.
6. Since Jesus was at least one emanation removed from God, He contained a fraction less of the “divine fullness” (Greek – pleroma) of which God possessed.

New aspects of Gnosticism that we have not previously discussed

7. The body is matter, therefore evil. This “fact,” as declared by the Gnostics, caused their ethics of living to gravitate towards 2 opposite positions:
 - a. one needs to starve, beat, and deny the body's needs – called asceticism
 - b. one can do anything he/she wants since only the spirit matters – called antinomianism
8. One can have true salvation and relationship with God only by getting to Him through the ladder of beings that exist between God and humans. This is done through having right knowledge, correct passwords, knowing proper rituals, etc.
9. Since one must get to God by climbing through the ladder of beings that exist between him and humans, it is important to know angelic genealogies.
10. All the rules of the ascetic lifestyle need to be known in order to be kept and to enable one to properly deny the body. Thus, one needs to know all about Jewish new moons, Sabbaths, and all kinds of other religious rituals.
11. Only those who know the rules, the passwords, the rituals, can make it. They are the elites who have “knowledge.” If you want to make it, you must follow and learn only from the elite, those with the inside knowledge.

As we can see, Gnostic religion is no different than any other human based (or demon inspired) religion. Other than Christianity, they are all based on “works,” on things one must “do” in order to achieve, or merit, salvation. Mankind has a propensity for that and Paul’s concern that the Colossians would get sucked into that “works-oriented” thinking was part of the reason that he wrote this book of Colossians. He was fearful for them, which is the reason why he issues 3 warnings to the Colossians. We already looked at the first one, verse 8, “See to it that no one takes you captive.” We now come to the second one.

Warning number 2

Vs. 16-17 – “Let no one act as your judge in regard to food or drink or in respect to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day – things which are a mere shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ.”

Before we get to a discussion of these Gnostic rules-for- living, glance at verses 20-22. An exasperated Paul asks, “If you have died with Christ (“died,” there is that “separated” concept we talked about last Sunday. This word, “apothnesko” = to die, in the sense of being separated) to the elementary principles of the world (“elementary principles,” there is that “stoy khi on” word again = baby stuff, the A,B,C’s, either generated by humans or derived from the demons), why, as if you were living in the world, do you submit yourself to decrees, such as, “do not handle, do not taste, do not touch...which are the teachings of men?”

These are akin to our modern day misguided rules-for-living, taught in some Christian circles. Don’t grow this out, don’t wear that over there, don’t cut that off, cut that beard off, don’t listen to that, don’t play those cards, forget blue jeans for Sunday services. We have many of these man-made regulations that if kept, pass for spiritual living. Some of the rules may contain good advice, but when we make that the measure of whether we are a good Christian or not ... Come on. Paul says, “Don’t you know you are already complete in Him” (vs. 10). Stop listening, verse 16, to those who are acting as your judge in regards to food, and drink, and holidays, and Sabbath, and all that sort of thing, things that are a mere shadow of what is to come but the substance belongs to Christ. Paul was directly referring to point 10 above, in the beliefs of the Gnostics, as they pulled out all kinds of regulations from the Old Testament Jewish laws, which had become obsolete after Christ died to fulfil them. But not only in the old days of the Gnostics, modern day churches are prone to pulling out similar regulations.

Not that long ago, I saw a patient for an eye exam, a lady, who went to a prominent church in this area. We talked about that church for a bit and I found out that she was in anguish and spiritual misery. I asked her what had gone wrong. She said, “It seems to me that the only thing we hear about in church is NOT how great the Lord is and how light is His yoke that we bear, but rather, all I hear is wear this here, don’t do that, cut this off, don’t eat that, don’t play this, attend and volunteer in the church 5 days a week ... it has become such a burden. I’ve lost the joy of the Lord, there is nothing but rules and they are reviewed weekly.” She was the person from whom I got the oft-heard remark that comes from me, “Don’t wear blue jeans to Sunday evening church.” She told me that it was again preached on from the pulpit, the Sunday before she had the eye exam in my office. Now, I can teach some good material about how we ought to view our clothing, how we dress, how we should look when we attend church. But that will not dictate whether or not we are in the kingdom of God. Yet that is what some try to make those peripheral matters speak to. This poor lady was dying on the vine, spiritually that is. Those in leadership over her were acting as judge over matters that

should not have carried such weight. Paul says here is vs. 16, “Let no one act therefore as judge over ...” such matters of relative insignificance.

One day I sat with a 23 year old young man who worked at a fitness center. He claimed to be a Christian, I don’t know if he was or wasn’t. But at his job, it turned out that he was serially sleeping with all six of the girls with whom he worked. He was also known as a wild drinking party animal. This young man began attending the church to which I was going at the time. After about 6 weeks of attendance, he began to meet with and tell our pastor about the impact that the teachings were having on his life. The pastor asked me if I could meet with the two of them and that is when I found out that his parents were livid over the fact that he was attending our church. Why? Because people at our church wore T-shirts to Sunday evening service and guitars were used to lead the singing during some of the services. The parents had come to our pastor and blistered him over his delinquency in allowing a church to operate in this way. Here was their son, falling in love with the Biblical Jesus, telling me that for the first time in his life, he was getting power over the sin that had run rampant in his life; and his parents were doing all that they could to stop him from attending the services ... because of guitars and T-shirts. The leaders at his previous church, which he seldom attended, even called our pastor to upbraid him over our heretical worship services. Paul says, “Don’t let anyone act as judge in regard” to ... what? In regard to these shadowy, peripheral, non-critical matters. Instead, we should learn how to “walk in Christ,” which is where the substance lies, and not in the shadowy land of rules about insignificant matters such as food, drink, holidays, Sabbath, hair length, clothing, and such peripheral things as this.

The external keeping of “rules” to demonstrate spirituality, like the ones covered above, is part and parcel of the human mindset and always has been. In 127 BC, a group of people known as “The Associates,” that is, the Hasidim, decided that not only were they going to “associate” themselves with the written words of God, in an effort to follow it more closely, but in that year, they also decided to “separate” themselves from: a.) the Jewish political environment of the day and b.) from the pagan and sinful Greek influences that had crept into Jewish society. From that day forth, “The Associates” became known as the “separated ones,” that is, the “Pharisees,” which is Hebrew for “separated ones.” What started out as a group of people who wanted to be godly in their lifestyle, soon turned into an organization that was driven by obedience to man-made rules. The transfer of their godly ideals and lofty desires for living into an organization that was obsessed by lock-step maintenance of man-made law-keeping came very easily to them. It always does for human beings. There is something about our human makeup that seems to predestine us towards the keeping of ordinances and rules in order to please the “gods,” whoever they may be. Since this seems to be such a proclivity (inclination, predisposition) of human nature, I have come to believe that within each of us there exists a “little Pharisee” that wants to grow up and dominate. Therefore, let’s look more carefully, for a few minutes, at this danger that often surfaces in the hearts of many people. Here are some observed facts:

Six Dynamics of the Little Pharisee Inside who wants to grow up and dominate

1. The better we become, in terms of outward behavior, the more impressed we tend to be with ourselves. (Mk. 12:41; Matt. 6:16; the Pharisees were so impressed with themselves, they wanted everyone else to also notice their righteousness)

2. The better we become, in terms of outward behavior, the more we tend to enjoy our goodness. (Luke 11:46; cf. Matt. 11:30; the Pharisees kept adding more laws to the list so as to enjoy their own self-made righteousness more thoroughly; it became a competition between the Pharisees, to see who might write and keep the most additional “laws”)
3. The better we become, in terms of outward behavior, the more we believe God is impressed with us. (Luke 11:39-40; the Pharisees had so externalized their religion that they were able to conform to their own man-made rules, *all you have to do is not walk within 6 inches of a girl and you are as holy as it gets*, the Pharisees came to believe that God was as impressed with them as they themselves were. Jesus also dealt with that in Matt 23:27-28. Note also, 1 Samuel 16:7’s evaluation of this type of external religion, “Man looketh on the outside appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart” KJB.)
4. The better we become, in terms of outward behavior, the more we tend to like the limelight, the praise, the power that comes with outward goodness. (Matt. 23:5-7; John 11:48)
5. The better we become, in terms of outward behavior, the more distanced we become from those who we judge to not be as good as we are. (Luke 15:1; Luke 7:36-39)
6. The better we “supposedly” become, in terms of making up and obeying our own MAN-MADE rules, the more we want to force those rules down other people’s throats. (Matthew 23:15)

In spite of the above facts, it is dangerous to get side-tracked off of what really matters and instead get caught up in rule-keeping. It is so dangerous that a worried Paul decided to issue this second warning to the Colossians Christians (and us as well). “Let no one act as your judge in regard to ...” and then he identifies examples of man-made regulations that humans are prone to invent in order to make themselves feel better. It is a human inclination to do this which is why I said that there is a little Pharisee within each one of us that wants to live out the rules for religion that we ourselves make up. The problem is, the rules we humans make for ourselves, being external, can blind us to the deeper problems that the Lord plainly sees and wants dealt with. Because the Pharisees were living according to their own mad-made rules, they had completely convinced themselves that they were living holy before God. Yet, they had totally disregarded the things that God had told them were far more important. They were self-deceived. They were like Little Jack Horner.

Little Jack Horner, sat in the corner, eating his Christmas pie.
He stuck in his thumb and pulled out a plumb,
And said, “What a good boy am I.”

Jack had completely convinced himself that he was a good boy since he was following his own rules for defining what was “good.” Look at him. That kid should not have been playing with his food. What was he doing with his thumb in a pie? And where was he? In the corner. This boy was a trouble-maker, his parents had put him in the corner. But he had the whole pie in his lap ... he stole it from the kitchen. So there he was, in the corner, having stolen the pie from the kitchen, playing with his food, and thinking, “My, what a good boy am I.” You may know that this nursery rhyme is said to be based on a scoundrel who helped himself to some things he ought to have not been messing with. Regardless, it illustrates my point about the Pharisees. Though the Pharisees had become “scoundrels,” they had

convinced themselves of their righteous behavior because they were able to keep their own rules, though they completely ignored what God wanted from them.

One commentator asked, “Why is it that throughout the course of history, it has often come about that people have led their fellow Christians back to the shadowland of man-made rule-keeping”? It happens because of the fact that there is an inner character flaw which exists in each of our hearts. There lives in each person, a little Pharisee that is clamoring inside, who wants to grow up and dominate our genuine spirituality. Besides that, it is easier to keep dozens of man-made laws than it is to love Jesus and our fellow man.

Let’s look a bit deeper at how the Pharisees operated. They were “extrapolators” of the law. That is, they could take one of God’s laws and add lots of other laws to help them keep the one that God made. In fact, the Pharisees took the 10 commandments and so extrapolated from them, that by the time they were finished, they had made 613 laws that eventually became of equal weight and authority (or higher authority) as compared to the 10 that God had given. That was wrong. Many of the things that the Pharisees taught were good advice, but they took “good advice” and raised it to a position of higher importance than God’s laws. When one starts adhering to man’s laws, pretty soon they become more important than God’s laws. Jesus had to deal with that. One day, Jesus said, “You have a fine way of setting aside the commandment of God in order to keep your human traditions” (Mark 7:9).

For example, the Pharisees took the law, “Thou shalt not commit adultery,” and built all kinds of additional prohibitions around it. They said, “Thou shall not brush against a woman.” In fact, “Thou shall not even take a chance of brushing against a woman’s arm, thou shall walk at least two feet from her.” It made walking through the hallway at church difficult. Before long, these things that could have been construed as good advice were elevated to a position higher than what God had decreed and the Pharisees became the “Behavior Police.” When a man walked 6 inches from a woman, the Pharisees condemned him as a sinner. “Ohhh, look at that sinner,” and we ask, “Now where is that verse in the Bible, the one that reads, ‘Thou shalt not walk closer than 6 inches to a woman’?” That’s the way it is with human laws. They sound somewhat wholesome, but they often end up being elevated above the law of God. **The Pharisees were so intent on being good that in the process something bad happened. They became proud of how well they kept all their man-made laws.**

Here is a false maxim that some Christians have lived by. “Strictness is next to godliness.” Some live life like that maxim is a fact, but it is not. A person can become stricter than God. I didn’t say “holy,” I said “strict,” you can be more “strict” than God. The Pharisees put more burdens on the people than did God. But Jesus said, when it came to these religious efforts and burdens, “My yoke is easy, my load is light” (Matthew 11:30). Some people think, “Wow, I have to live every aspect of my life under the authority of Christ? That’s hard!” Yes, but when it comes to the burdensome *“do this, don’t do that, grow this out, don’t grow that out, wear this here, listen to this music, don’t listen to that music for the beat is too fast, don’t wear that there, play this, don’t go here, go there 5 nights a week, eat this, don’t eat that, walk over here, pay that, rub that charm, pray that bead, bow like this”* ... it’s all “elementary principles” and not the substance of Christ. His burden is light.

So it is that Paul warned the Colossians, “Do not let anyone act as your judge in regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day – things which are a mere shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ.”

The entire realm of “judging” others and their “activities” has been one that has caused great confusion and consternation in the midst of the church of modern day America. We have gotten so off track in this matter of “judging” that people are afraid to make any kind of moral statement about someone’s behavior for fear of having done something wrong. This fact is demonstrated by something that my former pastor told me about a parishioner, who said to him, “But Pastor, come on, is it that bad? He is only committing adultery about once a month.” The person protesting to the pastor was a member in high standing with the church (this wasn’t at ZPC). My immediate thought about that is, “Well, it’s wrong, this once a month adultery.” “Wait, how can you judge that person” someone might ask? God says adultery is wrong. I have a black and white Biblical verse on that; it is not a man-made rule. Besides, ask the wife of the adulterer if she minds once a month adultery being committed on her.

Here are some clarifying thoughts on this subject. Jesus said, “Do not judge according to appearance, but judge with righteous judgment” (John 7:24). Jesus seems to indicate that there are two different kinds of judgment involved. Listen to Paul, 1 Cor. 5:1-3, *“It is actually reported that there is immorality among you, and immorality of such a kind as does not exist even among the Gentiles, that someone has his father’s wife (that is, a step son having relations with his step mother). And you have become proud, and have not mourned, such that the one doing this might be removed from your midst. I, though absent in body, have already judged him who has so committed this.”* Paul goes on to say, *“I wrote you in my letter not to associate with immoral people; I did not mean the immoral people of this world, but I wrote that you not associate with any so-called brother if he should be an immoral person, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or a swindler, not even to eat with such a one. Is it not up to you to judge those who are within the church”* (1 Cor. 5:9-12)?

I am afraid that some have gotten so far off base with this entire matter of judging that we can no longer differentiate between the sinner and the sin. It is like telling the doctor who has just diagnosed my cancer and has told me that it needs removed, “Hey, don’t be judging my cancer. Don’t be telling me I need to get that out of my life, it’s part of me, you just have to accept it, it’s my preference to keep it. Who are you doc, to judge that part of me like that? Leave my cancer alone.” This illustrates how confusion over this “judging” subject can lead to all kinds of induced troubles and crazy thinking. The truth is, we can still love doers of evil and want the best for them. Christ loved me when I was yet His enemy. He loved me while I was still a sinner. Don’t confuse judging evil behavior with hating a person.

Conclusion

Regardless of what is concluded regarding when it is proper to judge others’ behavior and when it is not, one thing is certain and Paul has shone a great light on this matter. When others attempt to get any of us to obey religious rules, designed to make us more spiritual, and these religious rules have a questionable origin, having originated with man, we are to run from those rules **or** ignore those human lawgivers at the least. Keeping those man-made “rules” has nothing to do with godly living and more likely constitutes living a dangerous lifestyle. God’s moral laws are spelled out in the Scriptures. Christian morality is generally a matter for which there is a black and white verse as well as a clear word from God on the subject. Next week’s lesson, when we look at Paul’s 3rd warning, will clarify this subject even further.